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Contingency Plans for the case of an outbreak of Avian Influenza in the EU

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Report Highlights:

The European Commission for Health and Consumer Protection is preparing a Contingency Plan, which sets out a series of steps to be taken by Member States and the European Community to address the threat of an influenza pandemic.

The Commission states that an influenza pandemic is likely to occur and that it is a matter of when not if.

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Contingency Plans for the case of an outbreak of Avian Influenza in the EU

The Commission for Health and Consumer Protection intends to publish a working paper on pandemic influenza preparedness and response planning which sets out a series of steps to be taken by member States and the European Community to address the threat of an influenza pandemic. The working paper is focused on co-ordination between national health bodies and availability of vaccines and anti-virals.

So far the Avian Influenza has affected poultry populations in nine countries in Asia. According to a FAO/WHO/OIE expert panel the current epidemic is still evolving and not yet under control. This is a devastating disease in poultry causing a very high mortality (up to 95 percent in 24 hours).

The highly pathogenic strain of the Avian Influenza is the one that could affect human lives, and that has taken some 20 lives in Asia so far. However the risk for public health posed by the Influenza viruses of avian origin should be seen in the wider context of the risk posed by the influenza viruses of human origin.

The disease impact is likely to be most felt by small holders and owners of back yard farming for their main food supply. It may be more difficult to prevent the disease in these flocks compared to larger commercial units.

The Commission for Health and Consumer protection states that an influenza pandemic is highly likely to occur, and it is matter of when not if.

In its sanitary and its economical dimension not forgetting the animal welfare aspects, this outbreak of Avian Influenza is unprecedented and although there is at present no indication of a developing human pandemic, this risk can, according to the WHO, not yet be excluded.

The situation affects the EU at many levels and several measures have been taken:

- During 2003 the Commission funded an Avian Influenza survey by Member States in poultry and wild birds. This surveillance will continue for strains that might mutate into highly pathogenic strains of the virus.
- The Early Warning and Response system and the Health Security Committee and Action plan which is a communicable diseases network for flow of information and consultation between experts.
- The Contingency plan in case of an Avian Influenza outbreak. The paper will address key-issues of co-ordination and the availability of vaccines and anti-virals. The Contingency Plan is intended to be a consultative document to promote effective policies and measures within the EU. The paper explains the stages of an influenza pandemic based on WHO definitions. It also sets out the main objectives for action. Moreover, it outlines the role of the Commission and the Member States in pandemic preparedness planning. The Contingency Plan will define key actions at pre-determined phases and levels in the main areas of: management and co-ordination, surveillance, prevention, mitigation and response, communications, civil protection and research. Particular reference is made to animal health legislation and actions to prevent and control influenza in animals.
- The latest addition to the measures to combat diseases is that the European Parliament has given the green light to the establishment of the European Center for Disease Prevention (ECDC). This center is to become operational in Early 2005.

- The Commission is also analyzing the plans submitted by the Acceding States so that they can become operational on the date of accession.

Press releases on speeches on Avian Influenza, by Commissioner David Byrne, can be found on:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/press/press_health_en.html

And

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/press/press_food_en.html

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